Interview with

KENNY BRENNAN

On the back porch overlooking Westmouth Bay

Harkers Island, North Carolina

Interviewed by Lily Johnson on July 25, 2024

Transcribed by Lily Johnson

Down East Change Project

LILY JOHNSON: All right, this is Lily Johnson, interviewing Kenny Brennan for an oral history for the Core Sound Museum, and we're gonna get started! So what is your name, and where were you born? Where did you grow up? Like, general life history.

KENNY BRENNAN: My name is Kenny Brennan. I am 27 years old. I was born Carteret County. Grew up on Harkers Island—and Straits, both of those interchangeably—but spent most of my time on Harkers Island. Family history goes all the way back to Diamond City and that would be, I mean, my family would be the Rose Willis families that are on the Island.

LJ: So do you think of yourself as belonging to Down East? And why or why not?

KB: Yes, I do. I definitely identify with the Down East community as a whole, specifically Harkers Island, just because that's my heritage, I guess. And yeah, I would say that, you know, just because of the family ties that I have down here, that's what makes it feel like home, pretty much.

LJ: So how would you describe your community?

KB: I would say that as far as the Down East communities as a whole, you know, there's enough crossover that we all consider ourselves a group of our own. And with that comes a lot of—I mean not to not to be like cliché—but it's very tight knit. We rely on each other a lot, identify with each other through hardships. And also what makes this place special, so the heritage that we have—commercial fishing, hunting, carving, all of those things—that are pretty much mainstays within conversations around Down East and, you know. That being said, I think that with that comes a whole host of challenges, just because we can be our own worst enemies. A lot of times, we can't see the forest for the trees. We let a lot of things ideologically get in the way, so not to unpack all of that, but yeah, I would say that that's kind of the crux of what to answer that.

LJ: So what was it like growing up Down East? Harkers Island?

KB: For me, I, you know, I try not to get too poetic about it, but, and it always makes me laugh when I say "When I was a kid," because, you know, we make fun of our parents or grandparents for saying stuff like that. But I do think that the people that I grew up with and went to school with on the Island—we were kind of the last group of kids that seem like, that had a taste for what the Island used to be like. And so what that means is, you know—I'm not saying the kids nowadays, or, you know, younger, that the younger generation is not getting out and experiencing and stuff as far as heritage is concerned, but I think that we took advantage of what this Island has to offer in the form of, you know, you'll always hear stories about people going and spending days out on the Landing, and that's where I spent my summers. Whereas now that's not always the case—or at least, I don't hear anybody talking about going to the Landing and spending time down there, or doing things like pulling nets and messing in the marsh and just doing stuff like that.

So, you know, growing up, that was just a fixture in my life, as far as the day to day, or when we didn't have to be in school, that's what we were doing. Outside of that, you know, I always heard—kind of fixated on—stories

that were told of what set the Island apart from the rest of the Down East communities, what the similarities were, and what brought us together. And for me, that was important growing up, just because that gave me a sense of identity, that—especially when I got into high school, I realized that a lot of people had such a transient and kind of, you know, moved from place to place as an upbringing, and they didn't have an identity like that. So that was really important to me as well, and that's probably why I've tried to pour into places like the Museum, or take time to talk to family members and get, you know, make sure that there's no missing pieces, that stuff doesn't get left on the table, and then somebody passes away, and then there's a whole chunk of heritage gone, so.

LJ: So what was your experience like to move away for college?

KB: At first, it was like, I was ready for it. So I, you know, I did not have to be asked to pack things together. I didn't have, you know, Mom didn't have to come up there and drag me out of my room to get me going and headed in the direction of Raleigh, like, I was ready to go, by the time it was all said and done. Especially, I mean, high school had a lot of high points. But just like, I mean, for everyone, high school is going to be a tough time. So dealing with that, and getting to senior year and getting that behind me, I was ready for a change at that point. And so, fast forward to actually being up there, and I've said it, you know, in conversation before, where I was like, "I'm never going to be homesick." I'm, you know, there's not—"I appreciate the place where I grew up, but I'll never be homesick." And then, then it came down to it, and I think probably, it probably took about two months. Two months in, I was starting to get homesick, and then I just had to make myself busy, so that I wouldn't fixate on that, or [I would] call Karen at every odd hour of the night. But then I started to realize that I had something that a lot of people didn't have, and in the same vein, I had a lot, or had something that a lot of people did have. Because, going to State, obviously, it's an ag-heavy school, so there are a lot of people from, you know, longstanding farming families, people from the mountains that have, you know, a heritage that could cross over with what we have down here. And so I found commonality in my time at State, and leaned on that to get me through. And then, of course, like everybody does, you kind of find the missing pieces that, growing up in a small place, a tight knit community, didn't offer you. So you know, back-filling those voids that you wouldn't have gotten otherwise, unless you went off somewhere. So that was probably the biggest thing, you know, to kind of summarize all that, the biggest thing for me, of what moving off did. And then coming back, you know, it made me realize—number one, kind of helped me not get jaded about where I grew up. And number two—it helped me, kind of, it bolstered my appreciation for where I grew up.

LJ: So what, what was the, what was part of the decision to move back home, after college?

KB: I don't know if I ever set out and said. You know, I actually—probably quite the opposite—decided at one point, "I'm not moving back." And it was just circumstance, I think, timeline-wise, graduating in the middle of COVID, that had a lot to do with it. But, you know, to not draw on something that's very kind of mystical—everything happens for a reason. So I think being put back here after graduation, kind of secondary to dealing with COVID stuff and the dynamics. It all worked out for the better. And, you know, I wouldn't—would I have chosen that? I can't really say, probably not immediately after college. But the way it worked out, you know, I don't regret that either, because there was a lot of things that I was able—I would have missed out on had I not moved back at the time. And then, of course, 2022, I think—I moved back up to Durham, lived there for a year,

and then that was when I kind of leaned into my homesickness, and I was like, “Yep, this is not doing it for me.” And one of, again, one of those situations where things just kind of fell into place, with the job that I have now, that put me back in eastern North Carolina. So, I would have to live in eastern North Carolina somewhere. And obviously, it just makes sense to move back closer to home, so I live in Beaufort now. But it was more matter of circumstance, rather than me setting out from the very beginning and saying, “Yeah, I'm moving back home.” Because, well, there's a lot of there's a lot of good and a lot of bad that comes with moving back home and just trying to weed through that. And you don't always land on the good before the bad aspects when making that decision, I guess.

LJ: Yeah. So what kind of things did you feel yourself missing when you were off?

KB: Probably—I mean family, obviously, and the good and the bad that comes with that. And I realized that I was doing—maybe it wasn't so much that I was missing out on things, because what ended up happening is that I’d just make a trip back anyways. So you know, I was gone, but was I really away for any length of time? Probably not. I was, you know, maybe making a trip back every two weekends. But yeah, just maybe the pace of life felt tangibly slower down here. Realizing that, not even just family or people that I considered family—just grew up with, they were getting older, and the realization of that. And then also, the amount of people that had passed in the time that I was gone. And life gets in the way of things like that, and then you kind of have regrets after the fact of you know, what would have been different had I been there for the full stint of time? And so, there is a certain level of guilt which makes being away hard, and that definitely plays into it. And then, I mean, out of all the places I've been, I still say this is some of the prettiest landscape that you can see. So, the physical things definitely play into it as well. And the kind of, the resources that you can tap into from the physical aspects of being on Harkers Island or just Down East in general, so. And the seasonality of it, that was a nice fixture of how you could kind of set your year ahead. Where you knew that the winter months, if you wanted to go duck hunting or doing anything out on the water during that time, that was always available. Spring rolls around, and fishing starts ramping up. Summer rolls around, and there's no lack of anything going on in the summertime. And then fall of the year, you know, the mullets are running, you can go out and get oysters. So it's just, I really do, I still enjoy the seasonality of, and the resources that you can tap into throughout the year. So that was another thing that I missed.

LJ: So, can you tell me a little bit more about your travels and what inspired you, or still inspires you to travel?

KB: The first trip that I ever took would have been when I was 16, and my aunt took me to Eastern Europe. So, we did seven countries, and that was a lot for my 16-year-old brain to grasp. And that was probably when I got the travel bug. Because, you know, I’d been to a good number of places within the States before that, and appreciated it. But then you get—you know, when you go outside of the country—you get a view of the world that you had only read about or seen on TV. And you know, there were parts of that trip that put things into perspective. Still, a lot, like I said, a lot to grasp at that age. But you saw, I saw things, you know, I mean, of course it was going to be heavy on World War II. And so, from what I had learned about with World War II, and then actually seeing it in person, it made it not just something that was coming out of a textbook. And so, I think that, and then seeing people that were culturally different live their life, but also realizing that they were still people at the end of the day, made it something that I was that, you know, I appreciated that. And then through

everywhere that I'd been, I realized that, you know, kind of in that same light, there's parallels that you can draw with where you're from, even though there's so much that's different where somebody else lives, there's so much that's the same. So, that first trip kind of set the tone for moving forward. I think I did a couple more trips in high school, but then when I hit college, that was when I started kind of taking under, you know, kind of doing things on my own. And then the biggest trip that was, I guess pivotal, was a study abroad trip that I did through the University—met people, not necessarily through that—but because I was going, I met people in Scotland that, you know, became second family. And so it's, I guess, eight years down the road now, and I still go and visit them. And that's one place that was, or is, a prime example of, "You can have a home away from home," I guess, because a lot of Scotland feels exactly like what North Carolina feels like. You can go, you know, directly inland, and get mountains, and then you can go all the way to the coast and get fishing villages and places that feel like Harkers Island in a way. So, yeah, I think, I think that definitely is now, and definitely looking back, is what stands out, is the communities that I can, that I visit it, that feel like home, and then also, "What are they doing that I could potentially bring back and implement here that would make my community better?" Because inevitably, somebody's doing something different somewhere, and it's probably, I know this isn't a word, but it's probably righter than what we're doing here. So, yeah.

LJ: So would you say that your perspective of home or your community has changed after traveling so much?

KB: Absolutely, yeah. That's—I will say until I draw my last breath—that if you have the opportunity to go somewhere, the resources, doesn't even have to be a money thing, because the money works itself out. I mean, not to—you know, if you want to go bad enough, basically, you can make it happen. And I tell everybody that has any inkling of interest that they need to do it, because it's totally shifted my perspective and made me, it's made me mourn, I guess? I guess I mourn aspects of my community, because I know what it could be, and it also has helped me show a little bit of grace for my community, because I see where, you know where we're doing good things across the board. So it's definitely—and it helps recharge me, I guess—when I think about places that I've been, and then being back home and bouncing between the two.

LJ: Yeah! So, you said that you are pretty proud and connected to your heritage. So like, what kind of things do you do to like, stay connected with, or preserve your heritage?

KB: The easiest thing is staying involved at the Museum, and having a presence for my age group, I guess so, you know, the mid-20 somethings. We, by and large, you know, everybody that I was in high school with, and really, everybody that I was at the elementary school on the Island with, have mostly moved back to Carteret County, whether that's a situation of circumstance or being homesick. You know, I can't really say, but I think it's important for myself, at a personal level, to represent that age group and have a voice, because I think we bring something to the table that maybe has been missing up to this point—and a kind of perspective that's been missing up to this point. So, staying involved at the museum definitely a big thing, just because that I consider that an incubator for a lot of good work that can be done Down East. And then, at a personal level, continuing to just—even though we're all we're all busy, and I try not to use that as an excuse—visiting family on the island, and making an effort to talk at a deeper level with family, and not just, you know, "What is the weather like today?" conversations. So, actually getting somewhere and getting some history or stories out of that and mentally cataloging those, and I've done fairly well at either recording it, or jotting it down after the fact, so.

LJ: Yeah! So, would you say that other younger people are kind of doing similar things? Or would you say that the perspective is different amongst other younger people?

KB: I would say that mostly if—I don't necessarily think that the perspective is different down here, because I think everybody that grew up Down East has an understanding of what the stakes are, what needs to be preserved, or why it's special. That being said, we've kind of been brought up or, the way things are now, at the pace of life right now doesn't really offer a lot of opportunity for just sitting down and chatting. I mean, I definitely don't do it as much as I want to. And with that, I think we let a lot of things get in the way of what we could be doing. So, and really, I don't, you know, I kind of feel like an island unto myself sometimes, just because I don't really have a group within that's my age that you know, really has any vested interest in a long term view of what Down East is, and things to be doing right now to help us further down the road. So I think it's, you know, I'm not saying that nobody my age is out there doing stuff, but I think it's—we're all just, if there is others doing it, I think at a level, we're all just doing it very sporadically, or in a reactive way, more likely. Something happens, a storm comes through, or there's a big community shift, or somebody passes, and then we're like, oh, we're brought back to reality, and we need to start doing stuff before it's too late.

LJ: So kind of shifting gears a little bit. So, can you describe the natural environment down east and what you value about it?

KB: There is—so growing up, I realized that, you know, even people in Morehead didn't realize what they had. I mean, again, I'm not saying that I didn't have—I didn't grow up with only one thing to do, and that was be outside, but just because of how— what I valued, or what I was interested in, and I just spent most of my time outside, and so. And also things like my dad having a clam lease up until I was in high school, and so I would go out and work on that. Family being commercial fishermen, working in, you know, well at the time, or now, the only fish market on the island, and just kind of being ingrained in that, and not really thinking anything of it because it was normal. But I did know at the time that there is a lot to offer down here, just because it's so dynamic. So you know, whether it's being out in the marsh during all seasons, and seeing the changes that happen there, or going out to the Cape and walking from the sound side to the ocean side and seeing how dynamic that is. You know, it made me realize that—and I've heard it all my life—that this is a very special place, especially within the United States. And it's kind of, well, was a hidden gem at one point, and now it's starting to get press and notoriety, so it's not quite as hidden anymore. But yeah, there's that. There's a whole slew of reasons as to why it is, because everybody's realizing, like, this is a place that needs to be preserved, and it's a place that constantly changes. Of course, you know, there's, whenever you're around water, everything's going to be changing and shifting, and so that definitely plays into it as well. And it's like, come straight out of the science books, and I was very science minded in school. And you know, you read about wetlands and estuaries and all of that stuff, and then it was one thing to read it in the book, and then, like being in school on the island, we'd go from reading it in the classroom, and we could walk right out the door and see it in action. And so that was, yeah, that was pretty impactful to be able to grow up in that.

LJ: Yeah! So what places Down East are significant to you, like in nature?

KB: I would say, I don't know if I've ever really thought about that actually. I mean, it's always interesting to drive through a marsh and not think anything of it, and then when you actually stop and look what you're driving past, you realize how much is going on. It's not just marsh grass or cord grass. And you know, the marshes are where everything starts. And I do think just because they have to be integrated with infrastructure, I think that's always been interesting to me. Just because, you know, again, we take, kind of take it for granted of what we're surrounded by. That mixed with, probably kind of the, I guess, I don't know if you would say temporal stuff, but the stuff that is always changing, and watching what could be a sandbar one day turn into, you know, be swept away the next. I think stuff like that, and just like how transient everything is, that's always interested me, too. But probably the number one—and obviously, you know, I think if you talk to just about any person that went left, the left the island, or left Down East and came back—they always talk about how the marsh smells and how that's like a welcome home. So of course, that's probably what sticks out the most to me, is just being surrounded by that kind of environment.

LJ: So what kinds of changes have you noticed? Along the marsh, and around the shore, and stuff like that?

KB: So, probably the most notable, and you know, being put in practice and then realizing that it was probably not the best practice, are hard retaining walls, sea walls, and stuff like that. Everything that's been built on the front end of the island. And it, you know, the big, bigger houses going up, and then they put a sea wall in, and then the landing washes away. Stuff like that has been, I mean, it's just, it's very apparent that that's not a solution, that it's not necessarily a good solution. Of course, they do, they are doing living shores now, and shoreline stuff like that and remediation, but that's probably the most tangible change and kind of what has shaped what the island looks like now, I would say.

LJ: So how have hurricanes impacted you?

KB: I really wouldn't—I would say that at a personal level, it would just be more of an emotional thing because of—well, I guess that's not true. Hurricanes are just normal. They're just something that you kind of deal with. Florence obviously shook the community, just because it was the worst one that we've had in living memory, for a lot of reasons, and it does take a toll. It's exhausting. Both when the hurricane comes through, the lead-up now is just as bad. So you know, it's like two weeks out, you're sitting there and you're mowing things over. "Is it going to hit you? Is it going to not—is it not going to hit you? How bad is it going to be when it hits? What is the aftermath going to be? What do you need to get ready? When is the next one going to come through?" So, as far as personal impact, it would be just what people in my community have lost, secondary to hurricanes. And when I was younger, it would have been, you know, what is it going to do to what my parents have? House? Property? I don't—I think a lot of the stress comes from, you know, if you do have any kind of assets, like a house, or a boat that you use for your livelihood, you know, that brings in a whole host of, you know, a whole new stress into the mix. And so it's more for me, I guess I feed, historically, growing up, would be feeding off of other people's stress. And it's just because, if you're surrounded by that then that's what you feel like you also need to be feeling. And then, you know, if the storm comes and goes, and then you see what's left over, and what it's changed, and you deal with that for however long it takes for that to become the new normal, and you just kind of move on until the next one comes through. And of course, they seem to be more frequent. They seem to be worse. Isabel came through, and that's probably the earliest one that I remember going down to

Davis Shore Fire Department and sitting amongst everybody else who definitely got hit harder with that storm than what we did, in a lot of ways. And that was my first memory of being amongst people who had just lost everything, most everything, and going through the cleanup process. Sitting down to a meal that was brought in by a third party, or another church and seeing what community meant. And so you know, hurricanes have impacted me in a negative way, I guess, but there's also been a lot of positive to come from it, because it made me realize, you know, what it is to be fortunate, and what, you know, how fortunate we are to be in a community that can kind of deal with that tragedy and still come out on the other side of it and still live here at the end of the day and have a reason to live here.

LJ: So, have you, do you notice changes in your community after a hurricane will roll through?

KB: Yeah, there's, you know, it's always—it doesn't even have to be a hurricane. I mean, stuff can change. Stuff changes day to day that I notice. I think stuff we notice a lot more than we lead on to, change-wise in the setting around us—because it does happen every day—it's just a matter of what is the threshold for when it becomes too much change. And so, when a hurricane rolls through, the waterways will change, you know, the mental map that everybody has of where they run their boat, what they can run their boat through, that will change after a storm. And, you know, the face of the Island will change. Further Down East, you'll see a lot of habitat change just in the marshes, in the verges, along the road, and so it's, it does kind of, I guess you kind of get a jaded view too, because it is so normal. But more so, what I've realized that it's that, again, it doesn't have to just be a hurricane. Some of the worst change that I've seen has been with winter storms and when they roll through. So it's interesting to kind of parallel the two. But of course, hurricanes are going to get more press because I guess they're more exciting.

LJ: So, what is the community response like whenever a big storm, or a big event happens?

KB: For all of Down East, I would say that the response starts well before the storm even hits. And so you know, if you've got elderly people within any of the communities, there's a certain level of prep that has to be done—and that's usually just as bad as the aftermath—of what you have to do in order to prepare. And you know, there's a lot of people that probably don't—aren't able to do that, don't have the means to do that, and everybody bands together to make that happen. Everybody also freaks out and goes to the store and buys the bread and the milk that you always see leave the shelves first for whatever reason, but it's just stuff like that. You know, the lead up is just as traumatic sometimes as the actual storm is, and then the storm hits. And now, with communication and social media that we have, everybody this like a phone tree, and everybody's touching base, and making sure that, you know the people around you are okay, depending on what's going on, how long the storm is around, that can look different. But by and large, there's still, as long as power holds out, or generators hold out, or phone service holds out, everybody's still touching base. So it's still very much a community, for lack of a better word, activity. And then the aftermath,—and Florence was a good example of how bad the aftermath can be, and then what the response can be to that. And it's not just, an inward response either. It's, you know, it's people from two, three, four counties over, states away, that are coming in and descending on a place and helping try to get everybody back up on their feet after the fact. And you know, I again, I say that that's probably the positives that come out of it, is you always feel a sense of pride after that kind of tragedy sweeps through, because you realize what you have, I guess.

LJ: So, yeah, going back to environmental changes, is there, have there been any solutions discussed like within the community that would help to, like, mitigate environmental changes? Or do you feel like the response is more like it's just happening to you?

KB: I would say that there's, I would say yes to both sides. So I think, I know that within the timeframe since Florence, of course, people have been more vocal about talking points and solutions to storm mitigation, or as far as, like, storm damage mitigation, you know, further Down East in places that were heavily impacted. Of course, the number one response is, if anybody could raise their house, go ahead and get your house raised. Because the one thing that's not going to change is, at some point, you are going to have water inundation, or, you know, there's going to be flooding. At a county level, there's a lot of things that have been talked about that are more reactionary than proactive. Of course, there's been things within municipalities that have been put in place as far as response systems, better outreach. And through communication, I think there's a certain level that's lacking as far as the integration of each community, so it's still very much separated. It still feels separated from one community to the next, where there could be—I think having a network is going to be, at the end of the day, our biggest asset for—I'm speaking just to the Down East communities, just because with Florence, there was such… we were inundated with stuff that came in from, like I said, from out of state, I mean, states away, and couldn't handle it. And so, I don't know—without speaking to something that I don't have full insight to—it doesn't seem, from what I've heard, and from talking to people, it doesn't seem like we're any more integrated to be prepared for handling that volume of stuff. So that's just one point. And as far as, like, infrastructure, you know, that's going to be a decades long thing, that there's, you know, there's factors that play into that, as to why people might be dragging their feet to get stuff done. But at a community level, there's the outcry for a laundry list of change, of things that need to be changed, and some, most of it is secondary to things that fall within the category of climate crisis, and I think that is, because of that, it kind of falls on deaf ears. So, we know that storms are getting more intense, we know that they're becoming more frequent, we know that it's not a matter of if another Florence comes along, it's a matter of when another Florence comes along. And if we don't acknowledge the fact that there's something happening that is causing this change, then I think you know, we just get into a cycle of complacency that doesn't set us up for success. And you know, it was, it's been interesting to listen to not just community lay people, but commercial fishermen, who are not even just talking about the weather, but they're talking about changes in fishing cycles, and seasons, and fish numbers, and location of certain species, and so, you know, it's almost like the writings on the wall, that there is a tangible change happening. And basically, are we going to kind of ignore that and just chalk it up to another cycle that we're not, we don't have a hand in causing, I guess? Or are we actually going to take that, and affect change within just our community, at what level we can, so that we're better prepared?

LJ: Yeah, so, what do you hope your community will look like in the future? Or, what do you hope for younger generations?

KB: I would hope that younger generations would still have a vested interest in the communities. Still have an involvement, and understand that the people that have laid, kind of the groundwork and the foundation before them, did it so that somebody would grab the baton and take the torch forward. And not get, you know, not get downtrodden by the pace that things move, because it's not an overnight fix on a lot of things that we need to

see change in. It's more of a long term, like you got to have the end game in sight, and it might be a long time before that comes to fruition. And the things that I would, down the road, how, you know, what I would want to see for my community, and Down East communities as a whole, is probably an understanding that, you know, we're not disconnected from what we're surrounded by. So you know, everything that we do is going to have an influence on everything that we have around us, and appreciate and make livelihoods from.

So, you know, it's the butterfly effect, in essence, where it doesn't take much for there to be a huge impact down the road. And there's really easy, small things that can be done on a daily basis to make things better in the long run, I guess. But you know, I think, I think we might be beyond the point of implementing things like—and I've thought that this is something that, you know, figureheads and county officials should have done in advance of where we're at now—but some ordinances, I think we could have benefited from ordinances in place. And I mean, it's just, at the end of the day, it's hard because as a tourist destination, money's going to talk. And I think, you know, everybody's got their sights set on the next big wave of money coming through. But at some point, there's, it becomes a tipping point where you've gone too far ahead and you've lost the essence of, and the reasons that make a place special. And so I would hope, down the road, and looking forward into the future of the Island itself, and Down East communities, that we start realizing that, you know, you can only bring so many people in before a place starts degrading because of that. And it's, yeah, I think that's it.

LJ: Yeah, so, do you have any more concerns about the future of your community?

KB: Yeah, I mean, I think that, you know, I think that we need to, kind of do a better job of looking inwardly. And again, I said it earlier, that we can kind of get lost, and not see the forest for the trees. And by that, I mean, you know, we get—it's easy to say that we appreciate where, we love where we've grown up, or we love where we live, but if you are just saying that, and not doing anything to preserve that, then, or not being an active member in the community, then then it's to its detriment. So, yeah.

LJ: Yeah, well that’s all I have for you. So thank you!

KB: Yep.